

Cowboy Excellence, Civic Education, and Human Equality in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*

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As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, now is an especially fitting time to take stock of American literature's contribution to civic discourse on equality. Scholars of politics and literature have long argued that "literature promises to political scientists the same thing" as "political philosophy" does: to "reveal not just *what* people do . . . but *why* they do what they do—the underlying motivations for their political opinions and their corresponding political actions."¹ But scholars also recognize that more than just serving as an explanation of political phenomena, "the novel, the novella, and the story" provide a "philosophic education of America's citizens" that is at once "*public, political, and accessible*."² Hence, as Catherine Zuckert notes, any literary author who undertakes "describing American mores" with the intention to "reshape" them is ultimately "engaging in an important—if little appreciated—form of political leadership."³

Of the genres that America has produced, there is perhaps none more stereotypically American, and none more overtly concerned with the development of American civic life, than the Western. As Paul Cantor suggests, the Western's "setting on the frontier between civilization and barbarism" provides "a vehicle for exploring a fundamental American problem: the difficult choice between freedom and law . . . embodied in . . . a lone individual [set] against the combined forces of society."⁴ By portraying a world on the cusp of civilization where force seems to hold greater sway

than reason, Westerns necessarily raise questions about the state of nature, the dawn of civilization, and the kind of education and person required to bring about law and order.⁵

While numerous books and articles have been written on the unique contribution of Western films and novels to American political thought, barely any time has been devoted by political theorists—as opposed to scholars of literature, American studies, history, psychology, or so on⁶—to examining the very first American Western: Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, which “redefined” the genre as “serious” fiction.⁷ This article rectifies that oversight by explicating the contribution of *The Virginian* to discourse on equality, education, and human excellence. Set in 1874, *The Virginian* begins with an unnamed narrator arriving in the Wyoming territory from the East. He soon meets a similarly unnamed man, referred to only as “the Virginian.” The rest of the novel is a sort of *bildungsroman*, documenting the Virginian’s transformation from a playful youth to a serious adult, his budding romance with the local schoolteacher, and his growing rivalry with a cowboy named Trampas. Through his eponymous hero, Wister introduces three central and interrelated themes—education, equality, and political rule—that provide a backbone to the novel’s narrative. It is the tension between and potential reconciliation of these three themes that is the unique focus of the novel and the vehicle through which Wister introduces his ruminations on a deeper political problem that, in his view, all American citizens must wrestle with: the need for civic education as a bulwark of equality and defender of democracy.

This article shows that Wister considered civic education to be essential for maintaining democracy and that the novel’s hero (the Virginian) serves as a model that contributes to the civic education of his American readers. Wister creates a hero who embodies arguments for and shows the interconnected nature of meritocracy, equality of condition (but not equality of outcome), and the moral authority of popular consent. Insofar as Wister’s novel is an attempt to educate readers—readers who themselves make up and constitute the people from which American political authority and moral

legitimacy are derived—his book aims to provide guidance to the public about which qualities are meritorious and which individuals are worthy of elevating to high offices of political leadership. Hence, Wister is interested in explicating the authority that American democracy gives to the people, in determining the moral duties entailed by such a grant of authority, and in educating the American people to best utilize that authority.⁸

In arguing as much, I break with scholars who read the novel as radically individualistic, elitist, and anti-democratic. Instead, I argue that recognizing the centrality of civic education within Wister's seminal story points to a radically pro-democratic and anti-individualistic picture of politics, especially since Wister understands civic education to be a refinement of public opinion, a goal that takes as a given the legitimacy and authority of popular consent.⁹ Especially when the drama of the novel is read in light of Wister's preface, it becomes clear that Wister conceives of the great individual as someone dependent on democratic institutions and customs, not above them. In this way, the novel points to community—especially as bolstered by civic education—as the primary and perhaps only place where true freedom, individual excellence, and equality (understood as equality of condition) can be harmonized to the benefit of both the private and the public good. Wister thereby paints a paradoxical picture in which democratic society's commitment to equality (which he sees as necessarily manifesting as meritocracy) offers the clearest path for individuals to achieve excellence, nobility, and distinction.

Self-Sufficiency and the Virginian's Shakespearean Education

From the outset of his novel Wister indicates that *The Virginian* is about civic education. In his original 1902 preface, for example, Wister argues that the American West can serve as a reminder to twentieth-century Americans of what life and politics were like in the founding era.¹⁰ But it is in his 1911 rededication and preface that Wister makes his intent to offer a kind of civic education explicit. There, he states:

After nigh half-a-century of shirking and evasion, Americans are beginning to look at themselves and their institutions straight; to perceive that Firecrackers and Orations once a year, and selling your vote or casting it for unknown nobodies, is not enough attention to pay to the Republic. If this book be anything more than an American story, it is an expression of American faith. Our Democracy has many enemies . . . but I believe the pillars [of our house] will not fall, and that, with mistakes at times, but with wisdom in the main, we people will prove ourselves equal to the severest test to which political man has yet subjected himself—the test of Democracy.¹¹

The novel, then, aims to be both an expression of the “American faith” and a call for Americans “to look at themselves and their institutions straight.” Americans of the early twentieth century, he suggests, have forgotten that “the test of Democracy” is the “severest test to which political man has yet subjected himself.” Yet despite the current state of politics in the post-Civil War era, Wister still believes that the American people will prove themselves, in the end, to be equal to the situation.

In fact, much of the novel’s narrative focuses on education. The backbone of *The Virginian*’s storyline is the education of its main character, the eponymous Virginian, which begins in the twelfth chapter with the arrival of his love interest, the schoolteacher Miss Molly Stark Wood. Initially, the Virginian’s only interest in learning is as an excuse to woo Miss Wood. He begins by asking her to “lend” him books so that he can “watch her ways and learn” about her and her job.¹² As the Virginian reads, however, his education begins to change him and his view of the world. The Virginian disdains popular literature (such as detective stories),¹³ dislikes the “frillery” of Victorian novels (such as Jane Austen’s *Emma* and George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*),¹⁴ identifies with the noble characters of Russian literature, such as Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*,¹⁵ and finds himself elevated and even educated by reading Shakespeare. In the end, the Virginian decides that he likes

Shakespeare—whose work he later describes as “bed-rock”¹⁶—so much that he “[buys] Shakespeare for himself,” the only book he is described as acquiring.¹⁷

By the end of the twelfth chapter, the Virginian’s education moves beyond a series of didactic readings to an outright dialectical consideration of American equality. While out on a ride with Miss Wood, the Virginian (now well into his reading of classical literature) notes that while Americans generally believe “all men are born equal,” he thinks that “equality is a great bluff” and one “easy called.”¹⁸ At first glance, this comment might suggest that the Virginian rejects the principles articulated in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence—something that would sit in marked tension with Wister’s claim in the 1911 preface that *The Virginian*’s story is an expression of the “American faith.” And a majority of scholars have read the Virginian’s claims in this way. Victoria Lamont, for example, asserts that “Molly Wood signifies the power and status to which the Virginian is ‘naturally’ entitled because of his inherent physical and moral virtues.”¹⁹ Max Westbrook likewise asserts that while *The Virginian* is “[p]resented to readers as the story of a just-plain-folks cowboy hero, the novel is, in actuality, a cynical attack on just plain folks and on anyone foolish enough to believe in the vote and in rule by law.”²⁰ Paul Outka, more bluntly and simply, opts to call the Virginian’s comments “obnoxious.”²¹

Each of these scholars’ criticisms of *The Virginian* as anti-democratic rely on three separate and, as I argue, incorrect assumptions. First, that the Virginian is presented as naturally superior and self-sufficient, in need of no external aid. Second, that his superiority and natural excellence are incompatible with modern democracy and the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Third and finally, that his natural superiority means that he has a right to political rule. In the following two sections, I consider the second and third assumptions in turn. Regarding the first, however, Wister’s emphasis on education, most especially the education of his eponymous hero, provides strong evidence against the claim of Jane Keunz that “Wister suggests not just that success is the result of native skill and acumen, but that one is either born with these gifts

or not and that no amount of effort can ever make up for the lack of them.”²²

Now by this claim Kuenz could have in mind either a “thin” or a “thick” interpretation of natural excellence. According to what I am calling the thin view, human beings are born with different and disparate talents and, though each person can (to some extent) learn and improve through education and experience, they cannot achieve the same heights as a similarly trained but naturally gifted individual. This view is uncontroversial, since most would agree that various skills (such as painting, singing, or athletics) can be taught, even while admitting that the heights of those skills are beyond the reach of some or even most individuals who lack natural talent. I therefore take Kuenz to be making the stronger or “thicker” claim that all talent and skill are, for Wister, naturally endowed regardless of training and experience. According to this view, the Virginian would be an excellent and self-sufficient individual capable of the heights of excellence and moral rectitude regardless of time, place, or experience.

Various passages of *The Virginian*, however, suggest that Wister has in mind the weaker or thin view of natural excellence and not the thick view that Kuenz attributes to him. After all, the very fact that the novel focuses on the educational development of the Virginian suggests that a proper education is a necessary supplement for democratic citizens, and most especially those naturally excellent citizens. The narrator notes in the chapter immediately following the Virginian’s education, for example, that the Virginian had greatly matured since when he first met him. He describes this change of character as follows:

His appearance was changed. Aged would scarcely say, for this would seem as if he did not look young. But I think that the boy was altogether gone from his face—the boy whose freak with Steve had turned Medicine Bow upside down, whose other freak with the babies had outraged Bear Creek, the boy who had loved to jingle his spurs. But manhood had only trained, not broken, his youth. It was all there, only obedient to the rein and curb.²³

By placing this comment in the chapter that immediately follows the culmination of the Virginian's education, Wister thereby suggests that learning played a crucial role in the cowboy's development.

Wister also makes clear that the Virginian is aware of the importance of education in his own life. Near the end of the novel, the Virginian states the following:

A Western man is a good thing. And he generally knows that. But he has a heap to learn. And he generally knows that. So I took to watching the Judge's Eastern visitors. There was that Mr. Ogden. . . . His clothes pleased me best of all. Fit him so well, and nothing flashy. I got my ideas, and when I knew I was going to marry you, I sent my measure East—and I and the tailor are old enemies now.²⁴

Far from claiming that the Western man is entirely superior to the Eastern man, the Virginian instead asserts that even the Western man needs to learn and can be taught by visitors from the East. (Here it is worth remembering that Miss Wood, the schoolteacher that facilitates the Virginian's education, is herself from the East.)

Nor does the Virginian limit this admission to simply learning about matters of etiquette, dress, or tact. In a later passage, the Virginian explains that education played a crucial role in his moral formation. In those key moments when he has been "ashamed" of himself, he says, it was always caused by "one or two people . . . [who] thought more o' me than I deserved, and that made me behave better than I naturally wanted to. Made me quit a girl onced in time for her not to lose her good name."²⁵ With this comment, Wister unravels a mystery introduced at the beginning of the novel that never resurfaces—at least, not until this comment. The woman that the Virginian here references, it can be inferred, is Mrs. Glen. At the novel's opening, Mrs. Glen is described in the moment of seeing the Virginian's departure as follows:

[T]he landlady looked her last upon the Virginian. Her lips were faintly parted, and no woman's eyes ever said more plainly, "I am one of your possessions." She had forgotten that it might be seen. Her glance caught mine, and she backed into the dimness of the room. What look she may have received from him, if he gave her any at this too public moment, I could not tell. His eyes seemed to be upon the horses.²⁶

That Mrs. Glenn proved to be a "general disappointment" to the cowboys of Medicine Bow seems to have more to do with the intervention of a respected friend than the Virginian's own moral excellence. Regardless, the fact that the Virginian describes the influence of these key individuals as making him better than he "naturally wanted" to be is striking, because it cuts against the strong or thick thesis presented by Kuenz. According to the Virginian himself, he needed to learn through experience and example to act well.

Modern Democracy and Natural Superiority

The second assumption of scholars is that the Virginian's superiority and natural excellence are incompatible with modern representative democracy and the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Or, as Jane Kuenz argues, Wister's novel

attempts to justify an antidemocratic vision of the nation governed by those few whose natural superiority is a function of breeding and inheritance. In the formula western, the hero is independent and self-sufficient, a natural leader in spite of his solitary existence, and generally successful at what he attempts in part because his talents are able to develop in a place as yet untainted by the preconceived notions about class, status, and merit that have corrupted life in the East.²⁷

And while the Virginian's claim that "equality is a great bluff" and "easy called" might lend support to Kuenz view,²⁸ two of the Virginian's comments within the twelfth chapter indicate that his

various comments about equality are not as straightforwardly anti-democrat as they might appear.

First, after questioning the principle that all are created equal, the Virginian immediately “*suggested*” to Miss Wood that “*maybe*” the Declaration’s statement of equality “don’t include women.”²⁹ Later, however, the Virginian indicates to the narrator that he does consider women to be included. He states:

Do you think there ought to be fifteen varieties of good people? . . . There’s one kind. And when I meet it, I respect it. It is not praying nor preaching that has ever caught me and made me ashamed of myself, but one or two people I have knowed that never said a superior word to me. They thought more o’ me than I deserved, and that made me behave better than I naturally wanted to. . . . And if ever I was to have a son or somebody I set store by, I would wish their lot to be to know one or two good folks mighty well—men or women—women preferred.³⁰

The Virginian’s use of the plural indicates that, at least for him, it was not one but two people that made him a better man. By his last comment, “women preferred,” he obviously means to include Miss Wood in his assessment. Yet by including her—and by indicating his openness to any woman serving as a model of human excellence—he thereby suggests that equality is not limited by sex. And by rejecting the notion that there are multiple “varieties of good people,” the Virginian makes clear that he is speaking not of a special kind of womanly excellence but simply of human excellence. (As to the other individual, it is most likely Judge Henry, the only other person whom the Virginian considers wholly good.) Thus, unlike Ethan Edwards—the main character of John Ford’s *The Searchers*—who “finds no place for himself in the civilization expanding onto the western frontier—not in any family, nor within the forts, nor even under the law,”³¹ the Virginian is presented as someone grateful for the opportunities, community, and formation provided to him by civilization.

Second, while the Virginian admits that when he was younger he “hated” the experience of learning “about the Declaration of Independence,” he suggests that that hatred has since dissipated.³² When pressed by Miss Wood, for example, he admits that he now enjoys learning and has since changed his feelings on the matter.³³ Implicit in this reversal is also the suggestion that the Virginian may have come to appreciate the Declaration of Independence, or at least a certain understanding of its principles, in the same way that he has come to appreciate learning, or at least a certain kind of learning. His preliminary criticism of equality is thereby presented as inseparable from his burgeoning education, meaning that the former cannot be understood unless seen in the context of the latter. While his remarks seem to suggest that he rejects the principle of human equality, a closer analysis reveals the Virginian’s views to be far more nuanced.

As the novel unfolds, the Virginian continues to elaborate on his understanding of equality and its relation to education. Nothing is more emblematic of this development than the Virginian’s adoption of Shakespeare as a lens for understanding himself and the politics of his day. In describing the nature of life and human equality, for example, the Virginian employs the metaphor and language of a game of cards, something that parallels King Hal’s use of tennis symbolism in *Henry V*.³⁴ The Virginian first employs this metaphor when he refers to equality as “a great bluff” and, what’s more, a bluff “easy called.”³⁵ But by the Virginian’s own estimation, his poker metaphor is entirely Shakespearean. He explains to the narrator, for example, that if Shakespeare had known about poker, then he would have had Falstaff playing the game all day and had Prince Hal beat him every time. When the narrator responds, an important discussion ensues:

“The Prince had the brains,” said I.

“Brains?” [said the Virginian.]

“Well, didn’t he?”

“I neveh thought to notice. Like as not he did.”

“And Falstaff didn’t, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, seh! Falstaff could have played whist. . . . You can play whist with your brains,” he mused,—“brains and cyards. Now cyards are only one o’ the manifestations of poker in this hyeh world. One o’ the shapes yu’ fool with it in when the day’s work is oveh. If a man is built like that Prince boy was built (and it’s away down deep beyond brains), he’ll play winnin’ poker with whatever hand he’s holdin’ when the trouble begins. Maybe it will be a mean, triffin’ army, or an empty six shooter, or a lame hawss, or maybe just nothin’ but his natural countenance. Most any old thing will do for a fello’ like that Prince boy to play poker with.”

“Then I’d be grateful for your definition of poker,” said I.

Again the Virginian looked me over amiably. “You put up a mighty pretty game o’ whist yourself,” he remarked.³⁶

Here, the Virginian refers to the English card game whist, a trick-taking game similar to euchre. His explanation puns on the trick-taking aspect of the game and draws a parallel between the tricks taken through cards and the verbal or intellectual tricks commonplace in witty banter or conversation. Whist is presented as one kind of poker among many, but of an especially intellectual kind.

Importantly, however, the Virginian rejects the narrator’s contention that Prince Hal “had the brains” and Falstaff “didn’t.” Instead, the Virginian argues that Falstaff did have brains—cunning, deception, trickery, and wit—and even seems to identify both Falstaff and the novel’s narrator as good whist players (that is, good at playing intellectual games). By contrast, Prince Hal (and presumably the Virginian) are identified simply as good players of

poker, meaning that their excellence transcends mere intellectual ability and touches on all aspects of human life. Or as the Virginian puts it, their excellence is “away down deep beyond brains,” which enables them to play “poker” well regardless of its manifestations (be that an army, an intellectual dispute, a dangerous situation, or simply maintaining one’s composure or character). The Virginian thereby presents “poker” or “the game” as a metaphor applicable to any difficult situation in life, but most especially those situations that are caused by troubles “in the world of men”—that is, the political world.³⁷ For the Virginian, then, the metaphor of a game of cards is not a means for explaining the complexities of mere politics, such as voting or jury duty, but rather a means for understanding political life as the quintessential human activity.

More clarity comes, however, when the Virginian attempts to explain to Miss Wood how poker relates to “life.” In that exchange, the Virginian notes that he is not the only person to recognize that some individuals play the game of life better than others. In fact, he argues that every person recognizes it in some way or another, even if the phenomenon is often called by different names. He states:

I know a man that mostly wins at cyards. I know a man that mostly loses. He says it is his luck. All right. Call it his luck. . . . I look around and I see folks movin’ up or movin’ down, winners or losers everywhere. All luck, of course. But since folks can be born that different in their luck, where’s your equality? No, seh! Call your failure luck, or call it laziness, wander around the words, prospect all yu’ mind to, and yu’ll come out the same old trail of inequality . . . [and so] a man has got to prove himself my equal before I’ll believe him.³⁸

By articulating the common view of the phenomenon, the Virginian also offers a clarification on the kind of equality that he rejects. The Virginian does not reject equality wholesale; rather, he rejects the all-too-common view of equality that maintains there are no meaningful or genuine differences between human types or their natural skills and dispositions. He thereby embraces equality

of condition as wholly democratic but rejects equality of outcome as contrary to experience. This is why the *Virginian* calls Miss Wood “strange” for believing that everyone is (comprehensively) equal while also admitting that some of her students are naturally gifted in learning. Thus, as Jason Potts rightly notes, “*The Virginian* attacks the idea that America was ever committed to creating a more comprehensive equality for its citizens.”³⁹

In this regard, the *Virginian*’s criticisms—which might seem on their face undemocratic and even un-American—betray a deeply American sentiment. The *Virginian*, much like Publius in *The Federalist Papers*, rejects the ideology of wholesale or comprehensive equality that was the hallmark of classical democracy.⁴⁰ According to the ancient theory of pure democracy, no citizen could be justly placed in a position of power, even by means of a vote, since every person is just as equally capable of rule as every other person. Hence, the only fair means of picking politicians—and ensuring that political rule truly reflected equality—was to do so at random by instituting a lot or random selection system. In contrast to this more ancient view, Publius embraces the more minimalistic notion of equality along the lines of human nature and rights, a view that gave rise to modern representative democracy and, famously, Publius’s theory of electoral refinement.⁴¹ Recall, after all, that Wister states in his 1911 rededication that “the test of Democracy” is the “severest test to which political man has yet subjected himself,” which suggests that the American experiment is one wholly new and unlike any other democracies that might have come before. In arguing as much, Wister sets himself at odds with the various reform or direct democracy movements that had sprung up in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴²

What’s more, the *Virginian*’s views accord with those of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Founding Father whom Tocqueville called “the most powerful apostle that democracy has ever had.”⁴³ In his famous discourse with John Adams over the natural *aristoi*, or natural aristocracy, Jefferson asserted that

there is a natural aristocracy among men[, and] the grounds of this are virtue & talents . . . [and] there is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents . . . [but] the natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society . . . [for] it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have pro[vi]ded virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society . . . [and so] may we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectual[ly] for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?⁴⁴

Compare this famous statement from Jefferson with the much-criticized comments made by the narrator of *The Virginian* in the thirteenth chapter, which are worth quoting at length:

There can be no doubt of this:—

All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality. The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.

It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the eternal *inequality* of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held up in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving hearts abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying, “Let the best man win, whoever he is.” Let the best man win! That is America’s word. That is true

democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eye-sight.⁴⁵

Wister does not mean to present the Virginian as rejecting the Declaration of Independence. In fact, he suggests through the narrator that the Virginian embodies the true meaning of the Declaration. Put in another way, the Virginian believes that all men are equal, but only insofar as each deserves an equal opportunity to prove their excellence. For this reason the Virginian has a hard time taking seriously any position of authority that is not earned by merit,⁴⁶ and he criticizes certain individuals for moving out West whom he deems unable to handle the roughness of the frontier. In America's "Western country," he explains, whatever it is that you do, "you've got to do it *well*."⁴⁷ And while such views may be in tension with the kind of equality promoted by proponents of pure democracy—be it a wholesale equality or equality of outcome—they are by no means incompatible with the views of equality presented by the America's founding generation. In fact, Wister suggests that the Virginian's views on equality are one and the same with the likes of Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, and Madison.

The Quality and the Equality

The third assumption of scholars who see *The Virginian* as anti-democratic is that natural superiority generates or entails a right to political rule. As Stephen Mexal suggests, "In the Virginian's view, the American West is distinguished from the American East largely by its ruthless meritocracy. For society to discover the aristocracy that will rightfully govern it—for a society to find its 'quality'—it must stage Darwinian contests of merit on the culling fields of the American West. Such competitions, Wister suggests, will enable the ascendancy of a natural aristocracy."⁴⁸ Elsewhere, Mexal even seems to suggest that the principal lesson of *The Virginian* is that might makes right, or that victory alone determines justice.⁴⁹ The problem, however, is that Mexal fails to note the important distinction between *rightfully* and *rightly* governing. By claiming that the

natural aristocracy “rightfully” governs, Mexal suggests that its members deserve to govern as something owed to them by nature itself. To say that they rightly govern, however, implies nothing about whether political rule is owed to excellent individuals according to justice. Instead, it states only that government is best managed when managed by the best.

The Virginian offers a stern repudiation of the presumption that the naturally best rightfully govern, even though the novel does suggest that such individuals do rightly govern and, hence, ought to govern according to the dictates of prudence. Judge Henry offers what is perhaps the clearest statement of this view in the twentieth chapter: “‘The whole secret,’ broke off Judge Henry, ‘lies in the way you treat people. As soon as you treat men as your brothers, they are ready to acknowledge you—if you deserve it—as their superior. That’s the whole bottom of Christianity, and that’s what our missionary will never know.’”⁵⁰ On this view, a position of authority or political rule is won by merit, not owed by right. This means that the consent of the governed is the only true foundation upon which members of the natural aristocracy can justify their rule—especially since America’s “whole social fabric is based” on “self-governing men.”⁵¹ What’s more, Wister’s novel expresses a deep faith that the average democratic citizen can recognize such political expertise and willingly submit to it.⁵² Or as Judge Henry puts it, they are “ready to acknowledge” others, if they “deserve” it, as “their superior.”

Later in the novel the Virginian makes clear that he shares Judge Henry’s views.⁵³ In fact, Wister even presents the Virginian as the embodiment of these meritocratic or republican principles. As Stephen McVeigh explains, “The Virginian represents for Wister a new American aristocrat, one whose position is not based on anything as intangible as a family name, but rather based on the demonstration of individual worth in competition with other men.”⁵⁴ The Virginian is portrayed as sensitive to the human dignity of the least of his fellow cowboys,⁵⁵ and he even acts in a brotherly way toward his enemies. This brotherly or democratic disposition toward his fellow citizens is most clearly seen in his

quarrel and eventual triumph over the cowboy Trampas. Not only does the Virginian refuse to complain about Trampas to Judge Henry,⁵⁶ but he also refuses to use his power as foreman to gain the upper hand in their private quarrel.⁵⁷ In short, though Trampas is the novel's primary antagonist, the Virginian is described as treating him "precisely like the others."⁵⁸ The narrator attributes all this to the Virginian's "magnanimity" and true gentlemanliness.⁵⁹

Better evidence comes, however, from the very way the Virginian rules over or manages his fellow cowboys. Wister makes clear from the beginning of the novel that the Virginian's authority rests on public trust and consensus, not by right. In fact, the battle between Trampas and the Virginian is presented as a battle for the hearts and minds of their fellow cowboys. When Miss Wood first arrived in town, for example, Trampas jokingly accused her of having an affair with Lin McLean. The Virginian immediately rose and demanded that Trampas apologize for lying about Miss Wood's character. After Trampas apologized, the Virginian explained himself:

He stopped and surveyed Public Opinion, seated around in carefully inexpressive attention. "We ain't a Christian outfit a little bit, and maybe we have most forgotten what decency feels like. But I reckon we haven't plumb forgot what it means. You can sit down now, if you want."

The liar stood and sneered experimentally, looking at Public Opinion. But this changeful deity was no longer with him, and he heard it variously assenting, "That's so," and "She's a lady," and otherwise excellently moralizing. So he held his peace.⁶⁰

It is in light of this exchange, which occurs under the eyes and rules of the watchful deity "Public Opinion," that the whole struggle between Trampas and the Virginian must be read.

In the center of the novel Wister presents one of if not the most important confrontation between Trampas and the Virginian.

The battle is not styled like the rest of the novel—that is, *qua* novel—but rather as a three-act Shakespearean play. Chapters 13 through 16 are titled “*The Game and the Nation—Act First*,” “*Between the Acts*,” “*The Game and the Nation—Act Second*,” and “*The Game and the Nation—Last Act*,” respectively. They are the only chapters explicitly labeled as acts, though not the only ones that contain Shakespearean allusion. The first and fifth chapters, for example, are titled “*Enter the Man*” and “*Enter the Woman*” and refer respectively to the introduction of the Virginian and his romantic interest, Miss Wood. Wister thereby suggests that the true heart of the novel is to be found in the thirteenth through the sixteenth chapters, or that all the rest of the novel is nothing but the prologue and epilogue of these three acts. And in this regard, Shakespeare’s plays are not just the crux of the Virginian’s education and a lens through which he understands the political problems of his day; they also serve as the framing of the novel itself.⁶¹ What’s more, by titling this three-act play “*The Game and the Nation*,” Wister makes clear that the “game” or battle occurring between Trampas and the Virginian is itself a microcosm through which we can come to understand American politics more generally.

The drama of this three-act play unfolds in this way: The Virginian and several other cowboys, including Trampas, are sent by Judge Henry to Chicago to deliver a train full of cattle. Before they leave, Judge Henry promotes the Virginian to deputy foreman for the journey and gives him two primary tasks: first, to deliver the cattle safely to Chicago, and second, to then “lead his six highly unoccupied brethren away from towns, and back in peace to the ranch, or disappoint the Judge, who needed their services.”⁶² Aside from the fact that the Virginian as deputy foreman has no authority to force his fellow cowboys back to Judge Henry, his job is made all the more difficult by the recent discovery of gold in a distant town named Rawhide.⁶³ In the three-act play, the battle lines are drawn over the discovery of these gold mines in Rawhide. The Virginian hopes to keep the cowboys from quitting. Trampas, though, is urging his fellow cowboys to abandon Judge Henry and travel to

the new mines. Both know that whoever successfully wins the trust and respect of the group will become its leader. Wister thereby presents the battle between Trampas and the Virginian as one over “Public Opinion.” The question is not who has the right to rule but which of the two cowboys the group ought to trust: Do they follow the Virginian, who promises a slow but steady income from Judge Henry, or Trampas, who urges them to quit their job to possibly get rich quick?

The first play is made by the Virginian, who plots to get rid of Trampas’s closest ally among the hired cowboys—a man named Schoffner who has served as the group’s cook and is most enthusiastic about the Rawhide expedition. At a pitstop in Dakota, the Virginian happened across a man named Scipio le Moyne, whom he recognized as a cook he had met some months prior in Omaha, Nebraska. The Virginian knew instantly what needed to be done: He hired Scipio and then (literally) kicked Schoffner off the train right as it was pulling out of the station (the other cowboys presumed that Schoffner was accidentally left behind, since he had just announced that he was going to buy a bottle before the train left). The Virginian thereby took away Trampas’s support, forcing the battle to be *mano a mano*.

As the outfit drew closer to Rawhide, and when the excitement for gold was at its height, Trampas made his move. He first attacked the Virginian’s authority indirectly. As they approached Rawhide Station—that is, the station that forks either toward Rawhide or toward Judge Henry’s ranch at Sunk Creek—some of the cowboys began to tell the narrator a tall tale about an owl-hunting expedition, culminating in the claim that they witnessed a woman give birth to a snake. The narrator believed the whole story—until he heard that last part. When he realized he had been the butt of an elaborate joke, he and all the cowboys began to laugh. “Suddenly,” however, he stopped and felt “estranged or chilled. It was in their laughter. The loudness was too loud. And I caught the eyes of Trampas fixed upon the Virginian with exultant malevolence. Scipio’s disgusted glance was upon me from the door.”⁶⁴ As Scipio later explained to the narrator, Trampas had “hit [the Virginian]

through you”; because the narrator was the “foreman’s friend,” to make a fool of him was to make a fool of the Virginian.⁶⁵

Feeling encouraged, Trampas then made a more direct play. He attempted to fool the Virginian himself by telling a tall tale about railway improvements, culminating in the claim that a train once went faster than a bullet. Unlike the narrator, however, the Virginian listened to Trampas’ whole story all the while knowing what was happening. When Trampas finished, he announced his victory by stating “You’ve been running too much with aristocrats,” and then he “turned on his heel” to leave. But the Virginian stopped him:

“Trampas[,] . . . I thought yu’d be afeared to try it on me.” Trampas whirled round. His hand was at his belt. “Afraid!” he sneered. “Shorty!” said Scipio, sternly, and leaping upon that youth, took his half-drawn pistol from him. “I’m obliged to yu’,” said the Virginian to Scipio. Trampas’s hand left his belt . . . [and he] walked out on the platform and sat on the chair where the Virginian had sat so much. . . . “Don’t you comprehend,” said the Virginian to Shorty, amiably, “that this hyeh question has been discussed peaceable by civilized citizens?” . . .

“This train will be lighter when it gets to that bridge,” spoke Trampas, out on his chair. “Why, that’s true, too!” said the Virginian. “Maybe none of us are crossin’ that Big Horn bridge now, except me. Funny if yu’ should end by persuadin’ me to quit and go to Rawhide myself! But I reckon I’ll not. I reckon I’ll worry along to Sunk Creek, somehow.”⁶⁶

Unlike the humiliation of the narrator, which was met by widespread and malicious laughter, Trampas’s attempt to humiliate the Virginian engendered “silence,” as the narrator described it, since “this was a triumph too serious for noise. Not a mutineer moved; and I felt cold.”⁶⁷

Why would the Virginian provide Trampas with the opportunity to humiliate him? Wister makes clear that the quickness with which Trampas made the joke, as well as the audacity of the play, dulled its effect. In fact, by allowing Trampas to make the first move, the Virginian really forced Trampas to show his hand. His public move against the Virginian succeeded only in giving the Virginian a justification to retaliate in kind. The Virginian did not immediately do so and instead continued to treat Trampas respectfully, referring to their exchange as one between “civilized citizens.” Knowing that the Big Horn bridge was being repaired—the bridge that immediately follows Rawhide Station—and that their trip back to Sunk Creek would thereby be delayed, the Virginian decided to wait for the last possible moment to retaliate against Trampas, thereby depriving his mutinous enemy of any chance of responding.⁶⁸

After arriving at Rawhide Station, the Virginian and his outfit found themselves fifth in line to cross the out-of-service bridge—about a two-hour wait. The trains ahead of them had been stranded for several days and had eaten up almost all the available food. The Virginian ordered Scipio to set up a fire in the brush beside the train and then immediately went to the marshy ponds adjacent to the station to collect frogs. (Trampas, meanwhile, led the rest of cowboys to the station, where they were unable to find anything to eat aside from a single brick of overpriced cheese.) The Virginian soon returned and had Scipio cook a meal of frog legs for the whole outfit. While the cowboys were initially disgusted by the idea of eating frogs, the hungry passengers from the other trains—all of whom, being from the East, were familiar with French cuisine—began offering large sums of money to buy a meal from the Virginian. Soon, everyone was happily eating around the fire, even the mutinous Trampas.

Once the stage had been set, the Virginian began to tell a story that expertly weaved truth and fiction together. He opened his tale by asking the Eastern passengers about how his frog legs compared with the cuisine found in New York’s Delmonico’s restaurant (an establishment the narrator had just recently told him about). He

then explained to the group that he knew so much about frogs because he had once lived in California, a state where men ran frog ranches much like the cattle ranches in Wyoming. The more the Virginian told his extravagant tale about the frog ranches in California, which just so happened to pay more than double what a cowboy could make in Wyoming, the more interested in the frog business his fellow cowboys became. Soon, Trampas and the whole crew made up their minds to travel to Tulare, California, to join the frog industry. Cleverly, the Virginian then began arguing that it would be better to go to Rawhide than Tulare:

“There’s a better reason for Rawhide than tickets, Trampas,” said he. “I said it was too late for Tulare.”

“I heard you,” said Trampas. “Opinions may differ. You and I don’t think alike on several points.”

“Gawd, Trampas!” said the Virginian, “d’ yu’ reckon I’d be rotting hyeh on forty dollars if Tulare was like it used to be? Tulare is broke.”

“What broke it? Your leaving?”

“Revenge broke it, and disease,” said the Virginian . . . [and] at those lurid words their untamed child minds took fire, and they drew round him again to hear a tale of blood. The crowd seemed to lean nearer.⁶⁹

At this point, the Virginian knew that he had duped not just Trampas but also the entire outfit. He then finished his story, explaining that the industry had been bankrupted by Chef Augustine of Philadelphia and Lorenzo Delmonico of New York. Additionally, he concluded, a disease that turned men into frogs: “Delmonico and Saynt Augustine wiped frawgs off the slate of fashion . . . and if yu’ ever see a man that hides his feet an’ won’t take off his socks . . . he has worked in them Tulare swamps and got

the disease . . . [and] yu'll find he's webfooted. Frawgs are dead, Trampas, and so are you."⁷⁰ At this, the entire crowd of Easterners broke out in laughter at the gullible cowboys, and Scipio stood and screamed, "Rise up, liars, and salute your king!"⁷¹

The Virginian had fooled the whole outfit and beaten them at their own game. What's more, he undermined their collective trust in Trampas as a wise and prudent leader: How could the cowboys follow a man to Rawhide who had so easily been persuaded to strike it rich in the mythical frog ranches of California? And the fact that the Virginian's tale was so much more elaborate (and public) than the tale Trampas told on the train added insult to injury. Crucially, however, the Virginian did not vanquish Trampas and then gloat. He instead humbled himself before his fellow cowboys—or in the language of Judge Henry, he treated them like a brother. After finishing his tall tale, the Virginian immediately explained and justified his actions as a matter of necessity: "[Y]ou insisted on playing the game with me this way, yu' see. What outlet did yu' give me? Didn't I have it to do?"⁷² After explaining as much, he then shook each cowboy by the hand and laughed—even including Trampas, whom he treated "precisely like the others."⁷³

Contrary to the claims of Sara Humphreys, who argues that the Virginian's tall tale keeps the cowboys "in a state of servitude" by denying them the freedom to become gold prospectors,⁷⁴ the Virginian goes out of his way to solicit the consent of the cowboys. He never pulls his gun on the group or threatens to force them to do anything.⁷⁵ That the Virginian aims to win the consent, respect, and trust of his fellow cowboys is exemplified by the very last comment he makes after he has reconciled with the whole outfit. "Last chance for Rawhide," the Virginian shouted as the trains began to move across the now-repaired bridge; "Last chance for Sunk Creek," responded one of the cowboys, and then all of them—including Trampas—got aboard the train to head back to Judge Henry.⁷⁶ Authoritarian commands never even entered into the equation. The other cowboys, to use Judge Henry's language, had simply recognized the Virginian as their superior and opted to follow him. Wister thereby underscores the fact that the consent of

the governed is the only true foundation on which the natural aristocracy can rule.

Conclusion

In most Westerns, technology becomes a metaphor for civilization. The coming of the railroad represents the end of the natural and the beginning of the civil.⁷⁷ But *The Virginian* is a Western that begins with, progresses along, and ends on the railroad. Without it, the story could not have taken place, since it is through the railroad that the narrator makes his journey to the West, on the railroad that the Virginian strikes his first major victory against Trampas, and because of the railroad that he eventually becomes an “important man” in the state.⁷⁸ *The Virginian* makes clear that the cowboy’s way of life is wholly dependent on the railroad, most especially for the transportation of the cattle back East. *The Virginian* thereby presents a world divorced from the fullness of civilization because of, rather than despite, technological advancements. It forces the reader to look at the nature of civilization from its peripheries. In this regard, *The Virginian* presents a world analogous to the civic condition of American politics during the time it was written: a world still reeling from civil war, both divorced from and yet somehow in the shadow of the founding generation.

The Virginian is a novel interested in civilization and the life of citizens, not in its opposite, the state of nature. The central thread that runs through *The Virginian* is an examination of the compatibility of the principles of the Declaration of Independence and human excellence. As argued here, Wister views the two as wholly compatible and even concomitant with each other. The Declaration’s principles set the natural aristocracy free from the confines of traditional or artificial aristocracy, and they do so by making meritocracy possible through the elevation of equality of conditions over equality of outcome. But this does not mean that these excellent individuals have a right to rule—their excellence serves only as an argument in favor of their rule. In this regard, the natural aristocracy is not a class above society but one born of and in need of the support of society. The guidance and direction they provide

must be informed by right reason and a robust education, just as the decision of the people in electing them to a position of power must be informed by an adequate civic education.

What is so remarkable about *The Virginian* is that it both highlights the need for civic education and offers a solution. By carefully cataloguing the Virginian's educational journey, the novel stands as a testament to the need for civic education. And, at the same time, the novel offers a model for and the beginnings of such an education to its readers. What is the meaning of equality, what counts as democracy, who ought to lead, how can we balance the real and the ideal, who were the Founding Fathers, what inheritance did they leave behind, and what do we owe to them and posterity? These are the questions of citizens and the ingredients from which civic education is made. Wister raises these and many more questions throughout his novel, and he provides his own answers for his readers to wrestle with too. And what could show a greater faith in the American people than the belief that they can prove equal to the occasion and rise to the challenge of civic education?

Notes

1. Bernard J. Dobski Jr. and Benjamin Kleinerman, "We Should See Certain Things Yet, Let Us Hope and Believe": Technology, Sex, and Politics in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*," *Review of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 599–624, at 599.
2. Patrick J. Deneen and Joseph Romance, "The Art of Democratic Literature," in *Democracy's Literature: Politics and Fiction in America*, ed. Patrick Deneen and Joseph Romance (Rowman & Littlefield: 2005), 1–8, at 4. See also Susan McWilliams, "The Tragedy in American Political Thought," *American Political Thought* 3, no. 1 (2014): 137–45; and Brian Danoff, *Why Moralize Upon It?: Democratic Education Through American Literature and Film* (Lexington Books, 2020); cf. Christos Hadjiyiannis and Rachel Potter, "Literature and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature and Politics*, ed. Christos Hadjiyiannis and Rachel Potter (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–16, at 14.
3. Catherine H. Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 7.

4. Paul Cantor, "Order out of the Mud: *Deadwood* and the State of Nature," in *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Cantor (University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 97–127, at 97.
5. Hence, as several scholars have noted, swirling beneath the surface of famous films such as *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) are the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. See Jeffrey Church, "Recognition and Restlessness in John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no. 1 (2009): 47–57; J. David Alvis and John E. Alvis, "Heroic Virtue and the Limits of Democracy in John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2009): 69–78; and David K. Nichols, "Lone Star: History and Human Nature in the New West," *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2009): 79–86.
6. For a variety of considerations written by scholars of literature, history, sociology, and even psychology that do not approach *The Virginian* with an eye to political theory, consider Susan Lee, "Forging a Nationalist Discourse in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Leopoldo Lugones's *La Guerra Gaucha*," *Confluencia* 35, no. 2 (2020): 2–17; Sara Humphreys, "'Truer 'n Hell': Lies, Capitalism, and Cultural Imperialism in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, B. M. Bower's *The Happy Family*, and Mourning Dove's *Cogewea*," *Western American Literature* 45, no. 1 (2010): 30–52; Max Westbrook "Bazarov, Prince Hal, and the Virginian," *Western American Literature* 24, no. 2 (1989): 103–11; Jada Ach, "Land 'Under the Ditch': Channeling Water Through Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," *Ecozon* 9, no. 1 (2018): 111–28; John A. Barsness, "Theodore Roosevelt as Cowboy: The Virginian as Jacksonian Man," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1969): 609–19; Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum, eds., *Reading "The Virginian" in the New West* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Neal Lambert, "Owen Wister's Virginian: The Genesis of a Cultural Hero," *Western American Literature* 6, no. 2 (1971): 99–108; and Stanley A. Renshon, "George W. Bush's Cowboy Politics: An Inquiry," *Political Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2005): 585–614.
7. See Ryan McMaken, *Commie Cowboys: The Bourgeoisie and the Nation-State in the Western Genre*, 2nd ed. (Createspace Independent Publishing, 2013), 80; and John Jennings, *The Cowboy Legend: Owen Wister's Virginian and the Canadian-American Ranching Frontier* (University of Calgary Press, 2015), xii. Most major edited volumes on politics and literature that contain contributions from political theorists do not contain a consideration of *The Virginian*, including Patrick Deneen and Joseph Romance, *Democracy's Literature: Politics and*

- Fiction in America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Sidney A. Pearson Jr., *Print the Legend: Politics, Culture, and Civic Virtue in the Films of John Ford* (Lexington Books, 2009); Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki, *The Philosophy of the Western* (University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Paul Cantor, *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012); and Damien K. Picariello, *The Western and Political Thought: A Fistful of Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).
8. For more on the duties and difficulties of interpretive practice entailed in popular consent and the sovereignty of the people, see Walter F. Murphy, "Who Shall Interpret? The Quest for the Ultimate Constitutional Interpreter," *Review of Politics* 48, no. 3 (1986): 401–23; and Wayne D. Moore, "Variable Constitutional Authority: Madisonian Founding Perspectives," *American Political Thought* 2, no. 2 (2013): 217–58. On the parallels between this view and views on popular sovereignty and education in the founding, see Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (University Press of Kansas, 1993), 108–12.
 9. Building in part on Patrick McGee, *From "Shane" to "Kill Bill": Rethinking the Western* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 25. Cf. John S. Nelson, *Cowboy Politics: Myths and Discourses in Popular Westerns from "The Virginian" to "Unforgiven" and "Deadwood"* (Lexington Books, 2017), 20–22.
 10. Wister notes that "when you look at the root of the matter, it is a colonial romance. For Wyoming between 1874 and 1890 was a colony as wild as was Virginia one hundred years earlier. As wild, with a scantier population, and the same primate joys and dangers," Wister, *The Virginian*, xxxix.
 11. Wister, *The Virginian*, xliii. That Wister intended his book to provide a form of civic education is also reinforced in his 1928 rededication, which ends with the following warning: "I have long felt that American education was in a parlous state," Wister, *The Virginian*, xxxviii.
 12. Wister, *The Virginian*, 87.
 13. Wister, *The Virginian*, 89.
 14. Wister, *The Virginian*, 207, 222, and 89–90.
 15. Wister, *The Virginian*, 90.
 16. Wister, *The Virginian*, 223, by which he means "a true piece"; see 225.
 17. Wister, *The Virginian*, 91.
 18. Wister, *The Virginian*, 91–92.
 19. Victoria Lamont, *Westerns: A Women's History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 46–47.

20. Westbrook, "Bazarov, Prince Hal, and the Virginian," 103.
21. Paul Outka, "Western Landscapes and the Dreamwork of Whiteness: The Virginian in *The Virginian*," *American Literary Realism* 49, no. 1 (2016): 37–62, at 52.
22. Jane Kuenz, "The Cowboy Businessman and 'The Course of Empire': Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," *Cultural Critique* 48 (2001): 98–128, at 101. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354398>.
23. Wister, *The Virginian*, 98. Or, as Forrest G. Robinson argues about the Virginian's maturation, his "transformation from the baby-swapping prankster at the novel's opening to the devoted husband at the novel's close proves as much." See Forrest G. Robinson, "The Virginian and Molly in Paradise: How Sweet Is It?," *Western American Literature* 21, no. 1 (1986): 27–38, at 29.
24. Wister, *The Virginian*, 320.
25. Wister, *The Virginian*, 138.
26. Wister, *The Virginian*, 33–35; see also 12 and 18–19.
27. Kuenz, "The Cowboy Businessman," 101–3.
28. Wister, *The Virginian*, 91.
29. Wister, *The Virginian*, 92 (emphasis added).
30. Wister, *The Virginian*, 138.
31. Church, "Recognition and Restlessness," 48.
32. Wister, *The Virginian*, 91.
33. Wister, *The Virginian*, 92.
34. Consider the opening of *Henry V*: "When we have matched our rackets to these balls, / We will in France, by God's grace, play a set / Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard . . . / strike the Dauphin blind to look on us. / And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his / Hath turned his balls to gun-stones, and his soul / Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful vengeance / That shall fly with them; for many a thousand / widows / Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands / Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down; / And some are yet ungoten and unborn / That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn. / But this lies all within the will of God, / To whom I do appeal, and in whose name / Tell you the Dauphin I am coming on, / To venge me as I may and to put forth / My rightful hand in a well-hallowed cause." William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (Simon & Schuster, 2020), 1.2.270–90. See also Hal's later uses, such as "The game's afoot" at 3.1.35 and "when lenity and cruelty play / for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner" at 3.6.110–15. For a different but helpful list of connections between *The Virginian*

- and Shakespeare's plays, see James T. Bratcher, "Shakespeare and the Cowboy: Prince Hal as the Model for Owen Wister's *Virginian*," *Journal of the West* 43, no. 2 (2004): 72–77.
35. Wister, *The Virginian*, 91.
 36. Wister, *The Virginian*, 100.
 37. Wister, *The Virginian*, 225 and 254.
 38. Wister, *The Virginian*, 92.
 39. Jason Potts, "Quality Inequality: The *Virginian* and the Invention of Meritocracy," *Studies in American Fiction* 40, no. 2 (2013): 231–57, at 237; Potts, however, fails to see that this is the view of several Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, and thereby criticizes the *Virginian* as un-American.
 40. See *Federalist* Nos. 9, 18, and 55 in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Liberty Fund, 2001).
 41. See *Federalist* Nos. 3, 10, 51, and 63, in Hamilton, Jay, and Madison, *The Federalist*.
 42. Richard J. Ellis, "The Opportunist: James W. Sullivan and the Origins of the Initiative and Referendum in the United States," *American Political Thought* 11, no. 1 (2022): 1–47; and Richard J. Ellis, "Benjamin Uner, Utopian Socialism, and the Origins of Direct Legislation," *American Political Thought* 13, no. 3 (2024): 337–70.
 43. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.2.7.
 44. Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to John Adams, Oct. 28. [18]13," in *The Adams–Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail & John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 387–92, at 388.
 45. Wister, *The Virginian*, 95.
 46. Wister, *The Virginian*, 136–37.
 47. Wister, *The Virginian*, 258 and 266; cf. 278.
 48. Stephen J. Mexal, "'My Dear Judge': Owen Wister's *Virginian*, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and Natural Law Conservatism," *Western American Literature* 51, no. 3 (2016): 279–311, at 299.
 49. Mexal, "'My Dear Judge,'" 297.
 50. Wister, *The Virginian*, 148. It is worth noting, despite not being the focus of this paper, that *The Virginian* also contains (as expressed by Judge Henry) a defense of Western lynching of cattle rustlers as an act of democratic self-defense, joined with a condemnation of Southern lynchings as acts of racist barbarism. See 278–82.

51. Wister, *The Virginian*, 282.
52. Wister, *The Virginian*, 92, 112, and 130.
53. Wister, *The Virginian*, cf. 138 and 302.
54. Stephen McVeigh, *The American Western* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 46. Contra the claims of Potts, "Quality Inequality," 247, I agree with McVeigh that the Virginian is actually a normal or artificial aristocrat (rather than simply part of the natural *aristoi*) insofar as he comes from Virginia.
55. Wister, *The Virginian*, 171–72 and 254–57.
56. Wister, *The Virginian*, 149–50.
57. Wister, *The Virginian*, 139–40 and 160–61.
58. Wister, *The Virginian*, 130.
59. Wister, *The Virginian*, 164; see also 9–10 and 175–76.
60. Wister, *The Virginian*, 71–72.
61. There are several parallels between the novel and Hal from Shakespeare's *Henriad*. To name just two: The abandonment and lynching of Steve, for example, parallels the abandonment and death of Falstaff—two actions that coincide with the protagonists' rise to power and acceptance of authority and responsibility. The banter of wit and the difference of cultural upbringing between the Virginian and Miss Wood also parallels the same occurrence between Henry V and his French wife, Princess Katherine.
62. Wister, *The Virginian*, 99; this task, as Wister makes clear, was made all the more difficult by the fact that "[t]he boys have been used to seein' [the Virginian as] one of themselves," and though there were "more steers than men to be responsible for . . . none of the steers had been suddenly picked from the herd and set above his fellows. . . . These things sometimes go wrong in a land where they say you are all born equal."
63. Wister, *The Virginian*, 102–4.
64. Wister, *The Virginian*, 117.
65. Wister, *The Virginian*, 117.
66. Wister, *The Virginian*, 119.
67. Wister, *The Virginian*, 119.
68. Wister, *The Virginian*, 122.
69. Wister, *The Virginian*, 127–28.
70. Wister, *The Virginian*, 129.
71. Wister, *The Virginian*, 129.
72. Wister, *The Virginian*, 130. Consider also the common sentiment that "the hero—typified by the Virginian as well as, to name only two more,

the heroes of the films *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953)—functions as a transitional figure: one who reluctantly, but necessarily, employs the violence of the Old West to end the rampant disorder of the early days and to usher in the peaceful, civilized times of the New West,” Richard Maxwell Brown, “Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1993): 4–20, at 19.

73. Wister, *The Virginian*, 130.

74. Humphreys, “‘Truer ’n Hell,’” 36–38.

75. Excepting the first conspirator whom he kicks off the train—though the Virginian later apologizes to Judge Henry for the incident.

76. Wister, *The Virginian*, 130.

77. Sanford E. Marovitz, “The Virginian, the Tenderfoot, and Owen Wister,” *Studies in Literature and Language* 15, no. 3 (1973): 551–75, at 574.

78. Wister, *The Virginian*, 323.